

Watching trees: the private lives of trees and woods in Britain's landscapes

An Explore course over five weeks with Max Adams

October-November 2017



There is a strong temptation to look at trees and the woodland habitats that they create, make their passing acquaintance, and move on. Watching them behave as they go about their daily lives is quite another matter: it takes patience. In this course I invite you to spend longer with trees in their natural habitat and learn about them by watching what they get up to: from biology to social interaction, from defence to attack.

Even in the age of science trees are still mysterious. The tallest can pump water to a height of well over 300 feet – but no-one knows exactly how they do it. Light is absorbed by leaves and converted into glucose; but physicists are still scratching their heads and wondering how leaves can do things we can still only dream of engineering. Most often trees are observed in their maturity: oaks with thick, fissured bark, their late summer branches laden with acorns; Scots pines with their feathery heads in the clouds. Start to watch trees from scratch, from seed or as young saplings, and you begin to notice some strange things going on.

We have about 35 native trees in Britain, some of them more obviously identifiable than others. We all know what an oak looks like; but can you tell a sessile from a pedunculate? When was the last time you saw a mature hornbeam (I spotted one just last week on a walk I must have done a hundred times and more).

In this course of five two-hour sessions we'll start by taking a very basic look at tree biology; in each session we'll take an aspect of their lives and try to understand why and how they do what they do. In the second half of each session I want participants to contribute with a sort of experiment – to be revealed, but nothing too onerous. By way of preparation, you might like to read my book *The Wisdom of Trees*; but better still, go for a walk in a wood and take a good look at a tree close up..

Sessions will cover the following:

Basic tree biology: water, sunlight, sugar, wood, nutrients

Shape: why trees look like they do, from leaves to branches

Sex: how trees reproduce, from flowers to seeds

Attack and defence: tree diseases, and how they have learned to fight back

Trees in woods: how they behave in a crowd; and who are the loners?